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ABSTRACT

Research for Better Schools, Inc., has been working with local education agencies (LEAs), intermediate service agencies (ISAs), and state education agencies (SEAs) to bring about career education impact in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. Their strategy includes three essential elements: assist LEAs in planning and implementing career education programs, develop materials for LEAs using this experience and develop assistance strategies for ISAs to support career education program planning and implementation in LEAs, and improve ISA capabilities to provide career education technical assistance to LEAs. Six lessons were discovered that suggested a need for revision in the project approach: (1) SEAs have been ready to plan and implement statewide career education programs only recently, (2) ISAs have not received sufficient encouragement and incentives from the state to support schools in career program development, (3) without encouragement, LEAs will not plan and implement program changes, (4) LEAs lack staff capabilities to plan and implement effective career education programs, (5) SEAs tended to rely on research and development resources developed within the state but now are open to using other resources, and (6) SEAs place high value on support from regional laboratories in planning career education initiatives. (YLB)

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ASSISTING SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN CAREER EDUCATION SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: SOME LESSONS

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Assisting Secondary Schools in Career Education School Improvement: Some Lessons

Research for Better Schools, Inc. (RBS) is conducting several projects which are designed to develop statewide school improvement strategies. One of these projects has been working with local education agencies (LEAs), intermediate service agencies (ISAs) and state education agencies (SEAs) to bring about career education impact in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. The purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss some conclusions or lessons we have reached in doing this work.

Original Assumptions

In 1979, the career education project initiated a strategy for impacting schools which included three essential elements. First, project staff would assist a few LEAs in planning and implementing career education programs suitable to local needs, conditions and preferences. Second, project staff would incorporate this experience into materials that LEAs could use and assistance strategies that ISAs could use to support career education program planning and implementation activities in LEAs. Project staff would work collaboratively with each SEA to adapt materials and strategies to contextual factors (e.g., state goal structure, state career education definition, type of ISA structures) in the state. Third, project staff would work with ISAs to improve their capabilities to provide career career education technical assistance to LEAs in their service areas.

Project activities which took place from March 1979 until about May 1980 were guided by a number of assumptions about how state education agencies, intermediate service agencies, and local education agencies

view school improvement in the area of career education. These assumptions are listed below.

State education agencies:

- view career education as a priority which deserves action
- will develop long-term school improvement initiatives similar to "thorough and efficient" school improvement processes in New Jersey or goal-directed performance-based instructions in Delaware
- will have career education as an identifiable priority for all schools within these initiatives
- would like RBS to work with a few schools and intermediate service agencies to develop materials and assistance strategies for use in guiding long-term career education program planning/implementation processes in other school sites
- would provide leadership and incentives to build intermediate service agency capabilities and to encourage school participation across the state.

Intermediate service agencies:

- view career education as a priority which deserves action
- would be willing to strengthen their capabilities to guide schools through long-term career education school improvement processes
- need encouragement and incentives from the state education agency.

Local education agencies:

- view career education as a priority which deserves action
- would be willing to initiate long-term career education program planning/implementation processes
- need planning and implementation support from the intermediate service agency.

Methods

Project staff conducted collaborative activities with each of the three kinds of agencies (LEA, ISA, SEA) in each state. Staff members with responsibility for developing and maintaining a relationship with a particular agency were required to prepare written reports describing activities in the field. Work samples produced by schools were analyzed by project staff. Staff met periodically to discuss their experience and to build a collective experience. They also tried to determine if that collective experience suggested conclusions or lessons which might be used to adjust project strategy and assumptions.

Lessons Suggesting a Need for Revision in the Project Approach

In the latter part of 1979 and the early months of 1980, the project was able to link its intensive work with four LEAs to state level career education activities in two of the three states. Subsequently, project staff were able to extend the SEA level relationships to intermediate service agency structures in the two states. As these relationships grew stronger and work progressed, project staff began to see that they would have to adjust their thinking if they were to achieve career education impact in large numbers of schools. Some of these lessons are now discussed.

1. While state education agencies have viewed career education as a priority for some time, they have not been ready to plan and implement statewide programs until very recently.

Each state education agency in the region supports the conclusion that improving student abilities to make the transition from school to work is a priority deserving of action in schools. Each SEA considers career education student outcomes to be among the mix of ingredients which are important for preparing students for that transition. However, until very recently SEAs were unwilling to specify career education outcomes as one of the requirements for acceptable school performance. In recent months, SEAs have been active in changing this situation. For example, New Jersey identified graduation requirements and began long-range planning efforts to find ways to encourage and support favorable school responses.

Project staff saw this change in state emphasis as creating conditions which increase the potential for achieving school impact in the region. They decided that they should invest project energy in linking project activities with state activities which include career education as an ingredient in helping students make the transition from school to work.

2. Intermediate service agencies have not received sufficient encouragement and incentives from the state to supply the support schools need to plan and implement career education programs.

As long as the SEA maintained a position which only suggested that career education is a priority deserving of action by the school, it only needed to provide minimal levels of support to schools which opted to initiate some kind of response. Typically, the SEA provided small amounts of funding to some intermediate service agencies, university consultants, and schools. The quantity and quality of service varied from school to school.

Once the SEA defines school career education requirements, however, it will be responsible for seeing that adequate levels of service are available to schools throughout the state. The SEAs see that ISAs represent an effective way to deliver this service.

Project staff believe it is important to help the SEA to identify the kinds of support needs that schools will have and to help ISAs develop capabilities to deliver useful services to schools. In the view of project staff, it is critical that SEA plans, ISA services, and school requirements and support be linked and coordinated.

3. Without additional encouragement and incentives, local education agencies will not plan and implement the kind of school program changes needed to achieve career education student outcomes.

Each state education agency in the region has planned and implemented school improvement initiatives in the past. For the most part, these initiatives have required schools to engage in general curriculum planning processes which were intended to revise school curriculum guides and classroom lesson plans. Schools complied with these requirements by preparing the curriculum guides and lesson plans. Project experiences with secondary schools suggest that this kind of requirement and compliance will fall short of making the kind of differences that the states seek.

In 1979 and 1980, project staff assisted secondary schools in such a planning and implementation process. Schools performed many tasks necessary for local career education program development. For example,

schools developed goals, gathered information about local preferences and contextual conditions, prepared objectives and lesson plans, and conducted staff development workshops. They utilized guest speakers from the outside, used materials available from resource centers and commercial sources, and conducted career fairs in cooperation with employers. There were, however, other tasks that schools did not do. For example, schools found it difficult to plan and implement student learning activities which combine community resources with those already in use in the school. They planned and implemented changes within a single area of school activity, such as the organization of curriculum materials available in the school resource center in accordance with their career education goals. But they did not prepare and carry out an implementation plan that spans separate areas of school activity, such as inter-departmental coordination of instruction and classroom-to-classroom coordination of instruction.

After working for more than a year with these schools, project staff believe that secondary schools will not confront many of the difficult problems associated with preparing students for the transition from school to work without the introduction of incentives which reach beyond those that the project can provide. Such incentives might include, for example, requirements which would be defined by a local school board or state education agency. Project staff see the importance of finding ways to both encourage and support schools to deal with some of the more difficult problems associated with providing a good career education.

4. Local education agencies do not have staff capabilities to plan and implement effective career education programs.

Project staff have tried to guide schools through a planning and implementation process that enables school staff to translate the career education goals for their school into instructional objectives for their content area and these, in turn, into learning activities for students. In practice, a number of variations of this process occurred. Many of the learning activities that resulted failed to meet important criteria. First, some learning activities failed to include and appropriately integrate both career education content and subject matter content. Second, some learning activities failed to provide good correspondence with the appropriate subject matter and career education objectives. Third, most learning activities failed to include out-of-classroom and out-of-school learning experiences.

These problems are due in part to the need for more and better career education staff development than was provided by the school and the project and in part to the fact that many of the organizational arrangements which could have helped teachers were not defined and implemented. Project staff believe that a staff development program for career education should help school staff explore student outcomes, school organization and programs, and values. The staff development program should help each school to determine its own specific student outcomes, program options, and values. The staff development program can then be oriented to dealing with: (1) the difficult organizational problems associated with career education, and (2) preparing curriculum guides and lesson plans.

5. While state education agencies tend to rely on R&D resources developed by agencies and individuals within the state, they now are more open to using other resources.

Each state education agency in the region actively recommends the use of career education resources (e.g., curriculum materials, curriculum planning guides, workshops) which were developed by schools, intermediate service agencies, and consultants within the state. In many instances, the SEA knows about these resources because their development was supported by state funds. However, in assigning value to these resources, the SEA tends to ignore R&D resources that are developed elsewhere.

Within recent months, SEAs have been receptive to project efforts to broaden the resource base being used to plan state initiatives. Project staff see this receptivity as creating a climate which increases the chances for using R&D resources irrespective of where they were developed. The criterion for resource use would center on the relevance of the resource to the problem at hand. Project staff believe that it is important to promote this criterion with the SEAs.

6. When an SEA is planning career education initiatives that require schools to achieve career education student learning outcomes, it places a high value on support it can obtain from a regional laboratory.

Each state education agency in the region had developed career education initiatives before becoming involved with the project. These initiatives placed no requirements on schools and tended to emphasize the use of resources developed within the state. When the SEA decided to define career education school requirements and to explore different

kinds of and sources for R&D resources, it redefined its relationship with RBS. This revised relationship involves joint problem-solving, planning, and development.

FY 81-82 Approach

In 1980, project staff redefined their approach for achieving impact in the schools. The revised approach is referred to as a "state initiative" approach. It is based on the RBS school improvement mission and the lessons derived from project experience in working with SEAs, ISAs, and LEAs. Within this approach project staff identify SEA intentions to plan and implement statewide career education school improvement initiatives. Project staff link their work and the SEA planning and implementation effort in an attempt to bring R&D and state school improvement practice in line with each other. This occurs as project helps the SEA develop strategies and materials which encourage and support the kind of ISA and LEA response sought by the state. Project staff then work with selected ISAs to extend the SEA strategies and materials to LEAs. Finally, project staff work with the SEA and ISAs to support SEA efforts to achieve statewide impact.

This approach rests on three important assumptions:

1. The best way to impact schools and student outcomes is to work with the formal education structures in each state
2. The SEA is the best organization within these structures with which to initiate work
3. Special state initiatives provide the best opportunities for impacting career education student outcomes in schools.

The first assumption follows from the RBS mission. It supports the multi-level involvement of institutions and organizations charged with the responsibility of formal schooling as a necessary condition for the improvement of career education student outcomes. It does not, however, preclude involvement and influence from institutions, organizations, and agencies which are outside of the formal education structures.

The second assumption builds on three of the lessons just discussed. One of these is the lesson which suggests that the SEA, as that part of the formal education structures with responsibility for maintaining and improving schools, is ready to plan and implement statewide career education programs. The other two are the lessons which indicate that ISAs and LEAs, acting on their own, will not find the encouragement and incentives to improve career education.

The third assumption builds on several of the lessons. One of these is the lesson which indicates SEA readiness to plan and implement these initiatives. Others are the lessons which say that SEAs value R&D resources and the support they can obtain from the project.